"Sponge Activities"
(designed for 10-20 minute self-contained lessons)

Language

1. Article on "To be" verbs:
   Distribute and have students read article. Ask them what "e-prime" is, who invented it, and why. Focus on the why—what is the problem with "to be" verbs? Challenge them to cut the number of "to be" verbs in their next draft (or current draft) in half. (If students have a draft in class on this day, actually have them identify and edit out "to be" verbs.)

2. Exercise on non-biased language:
   Good for increasing students' sensitivity to gender biased language. This could be done on the board, so you wouldn't even have to have handouts ready.

3. Article for applying discussion of revision, editing, proofreading:
   a. define revision, editing, proofreading—put the 3 terms on the board.
   b. Have students (perhaps in pairs) identify which of the 3 is likely at fault in each error. For example, the first is pretty clearly a proofreading error; the last is a revision error.

4. 100-plus short writing activities:
   Although intended for high school teachers, some of these may be of use in 1320.

5. "Hell" (also in Resource Notebook):
   Good for teaching general versus specific language.
   a. Have copies, cut apart like this, ready. Hand out version B 1st. After students read, have them identify and underline the general terms in each sentence.
   b. Then ask students to write a revised, more specific version of their own.
   c. At end of activity, hand out Holden's version A for comparison.

6. "Most Beautiful Words":
   from the London Times, 1993—
   a. Ask students to list their top ten beautiful words.
   b. Ask each student to give you (orally) his or her favorite word. Put these on the board.
   c. At the end, read and discuss briefly this list.
   d. Finally, discuss criteria—what makes words beautiful? End with admonition to pay attention to individual word choice.
7. "Describe Yourself in Exactly 100 Different Words":
   self-explanatory; also in the Resource Notebook. At the end, point out to students that the average person uses 50 words 50% of the time. It takes effort to vary our vocabulary.

8. A Lesson on Voice:
   self-explanatory; probably more like a 30-minute activity; could even take up an entire 50-minute class period.
To be’ completely removed

Bourland plan changes the style of English language

By Linda Shrievs
Knight-Ridder Tribune News Service

For more than 40 years, David Bourland, a Texan more interested in language than anything else, has tilted against windmills, arguing that English would be a far better tongue if English speakers would simply quit saying “is.”

And “are.” Along with “am,” “was,” “were,” “be” and “been.”

In fact, Bourland thinks the language would be grand — more colorful, more fun to listen to and read, not to mention more precise — if we simply eliminated all forms of the verb “to be.”

That’s right.

Bourland, at 63, has become a walking billboard of this idea, which he calls E-Prime. He would rather halt in mid-sentence, turn around and rephrase the sentence than let a “to be” cross his lips.

No more “How are you?” for Bourland. Instead, he inquires, “How do you feel?” He never asks, “How old are you?” Instead he asks, “How many years do you have?”

If you can’t see the harm in a couple of ises and ares, Bourland would like to have a word with you.

He would like the chance to preach against the atrocities of the verb “to be.”

The problem, as many semanti-
cists and philosophers before Bourland have noted, stems from English’s tendency to be an absolutist language.

That leads to all kinds of problems. People make gross generalizations (“Men are pigs.”) They state opinions as facts (“That is the truth”). Even the simple statement — “John is happy” — misleads people because, Bourland argues, it implies that John is always happy.

Instead of taking responsibility for our actions, English allows us to duck an issue. Just ask Ronald Reagan, who looked back on the Iran-Contra scandal and said, “Mistakes were made,” rather than “I made a mistake” or “Ollie made mistakes” or “We made mistakes.”

The debate on this topic — the failures of English to be precise — dates back decades, but interest in the subject has swelled lately, after Bourland and semantiscist E.W. Kellogg published To Be or Not An E-Prime Anthology ($17.95, International Society for General Semantics, paperback).

When National Public Radio broadcast a report on the book a few months ago, the phone lines jammed with callers seeking more information. Finally, the radio network set up a special phone line to handle the calls.

But beneath all the inquiries, one question continues to poke up: Just who does this guy pretend to be, telling us what we can do with our “to be’s”?

After all, Bourland’s resume does not exactly drum out a career in linguistics. Instead, the Harvard graduate spent most of his career working with the military, working first on the staff of the commander of naval forces in the Far East and later at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, conducting operations research.

After he retired from the defense industry, he headed for the University of Costa Rica to teach English to undergraduates and study linguistics at the graduate level. He left teaching in 1980 and moved to Wichita Falls. From there, the retiree drums up interest in E-Prime.

Yet somehow, even without a doctorate in linguistics, he has attracted the attention of the semantics community and won a number of converts.

His interest in semantics was sparked as a young man reading science fiction books. But the idea for E-Prime first occurred to him in 1949, when he spent a fellowship at the Institute of General Semantics in Lime Rock, Conn.

There, he puzzled over the verb “to be,” as philosophers have done for decades. But Bourland, in the course of reading some letters, found what he considered at first an absurd idea: a suggestion from a man in Connecticut who suggested dropping “be” altogether.

The more Bourland thought about it, the more intrigued he became. He called his new English “E-Prime” (borrowing from the mathematical term “prime”) and set about writing an entire paper in E-Prime.

Although the exercise gave him an enormous headache that he claims lasted a week, it worked. To his delight, the paper seemed clearer than any of his previous work.

Thus began his E-Prime journey. Until 1964 — he quietly slaved away in E-Prime — writing all of his papers in the language. “I did not discuss this matter lest I become regarded as some kind of nut,” he wrote.

But when colleagues and friends became aware of his personal crusade, they encouraged him to go public about E-Prime. In 1964 he did, publishing papers about the concept and encouraging others to try it. But in 1969 he decided that he shouldn’t limit himself to writing E-Prime.

He began to speak in E-Prime.

He tolerated critics who said his sentences all sounded the same. He even found himself fending off people who approached him and asked him to say things in E-Prime, “as if it were some sort of parlor trick.”

For years, however, he continued to use what he calls “the social ises.”

“I finally realized that because I hadn’t purged myself of those little pieces of the English language that I wasn’t being completely true to E-Prime,” said Bourland, who let a “was” slip into his speech during an interview.

Admittedly, E-Prime sounds stilted at times. When Bourland asks someone their age, he says, “How many years do you have?” rather than the verboten “How old are you?”

But he maintains that most of the time no one notices that his speech contains no “ises” and the like. Instead, listeners marvel at his vocabulary. And he, too, marvels that his use of E-Prime forces him to speak with precision, saying exactly what he means.
**Non-biased Language**

The use of man or male gender words to represent humanity collectively is ambiguous since it is not clear whether they refer to man only or also include women (and even children). Such usage implies that the entire species is male.

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<th>Example</th>
<th>Alternatives</th>
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<td>brotherhood of man</td>
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<td>common man, man in the street</td>
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<td>family of man</td>
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<td>goodwill to man</td>
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<td>guys (referring to mixed gender groups)</td>
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<td>layman</td>
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<td>man the phones</td>
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Beware of typos

If you’re serious about seeking work, be sure to proofread that resume, says Robert Half, founder of Accountemps, a Menlo Park, Calif.-based employment agency. Sloppy mistakes, typographical errors and divulging inappropriate information costs thousands of prospective workers a job, he says. Some real examples of applicants who didn’t get their targeted positions, according to Accountemps:

- “Excellent at people oriented positions and organizational problem solving.”
- “I have learnt Word Perfect 6.0, computer and spreadsheet programs.”
- “I never take anything for granite.”
- “To Home-Ever it concerns.”
- “Reason for leaving: maturity leave.”
- “Received a plaque for Salesperson of the Year.”
- “Wholly responsible for two failed financial institutions.”
- “At the emphatic urging of colleagues, I have consented to apply for your position.”
- “Referral from a relatively right sales rep.”